John 10:1-18
April 12, 1970

SHEEP

Several weeks ago we drove to Brown County for the Maple Sugar Festival and during that experience I learned some things about sheep that I hadn't known before. The prophet described the Suffering Servant in these terms: "Like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth." Well, as is the case with a lot of city people, I had never seen a sheep getting sheared. And as I watched the animal lifted, twisted, occasionally nipped by the shears, totally passive throughout, these familiar words came back. This sheep was truly dumb. He didn't open his mouth.

Totally fascinated at this point, I decided to reveal the extent of my ignorance by asking one of the obvious experts standing around what I considered a very logical question. "Doesn't it hurt? Aren't they cold after the wool is removed?" I expect he's still chuckling, but the man was gracious enough to explain that it didn't hurt, except for those few nips, and that the sheep actually felt better without the wool. Whether the sheep isn't smart enough to come in out of the rain, or whether the heavy wool so insulates him that he doesn't even know it's raining, the fact is that he will stand in the rain until his coat has absorbed around forty pounds of water. That makes him sluggish and uncomfortable and it doesn't dry out sometimes for several weeks.

Now I'm telling you all of this because it is indicative of a general predicament regarding Biblical imagery. There's a lot of meaning, a lot of freight, in the Biblical symbols that eludes us simply because you and I don't live in the writer's world. While I was preparing this sermon, Rev. James Sala called and in the course of the conversation asked what I was preaching about this Sunday. When I told him, he said something that summarizes our problem. "The trouble with that passage," he said, "is that where we think about sheep is usually in terms of the price of Lamb Chops."

That, in fact, is the problem. The image of the Shepherd and his sheep - so very rich in Biblical content and meaning - simply doesn't strike us as very relevant. And if we are going to get at the Biblical intent we have to do some old fashioned research — to discover what this image meant to the men who used it.

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More than 500 times sheep, flocks, lambs and shepherds are mentioned in the pages of the Bible. I've already cited one of them from the Fifty-Third Chapter Isaiah. Earlier in that same book the writer penned a passage which when set to music by George Frederick Handel never fails to move me deeply:

"He will feed his flock like a shepherd,

He will gather the lambs in his arms,

He will carry them in his bosom,

And gently lead those that are with young." (Isaiah 40:11)

And, of course, the most familiar of all: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures: he leads me beside still waters." (Psalm 23:1,2)

In the near East in Biblical times, and even today, shepherding was and is a highly complex art. It is not anything like modern American sheep ranching; nor does it resemble to romanticized image of sheep tending in the highlands of Scotland.

The best feel for Biblical shepherding I've read comes from a Basque interpretation of the Twenty-Third Psalm: "Sheep graze from around 3:30 in the morning until 10. Then they liedown for three or four hours of rest. When they are contentedly chewing their cuds, the shepherd knows they are putting on fat. Consequently the good shepherd starts his flock out in the morning on rougher herbage, moving on through the morning to the richer, sweeter grasses and finally coming to a shady place for the forenoon rest in fine green pastures..."

"Every shepherd knows that sheep will not drink gurgling water.... Although the sheep need the water they will not drink from a fast-flowing stream. The shepherd must find a place where the rocks or erosion have made a little pool or else he fashions with his hands a pocket from which the sheep can drink...."

"While walking, sheep stay in a feeding line and at least once a day the shepherd calls each one by name. The sheep leaves its place, goes to the shepherd for some affectionate rubbing and scratching and then returns.

"At every sheepfold there is a big earthen bowl of olive oil and a large jar of water. As the sheep come in for the night, they are led to the gate. The

shepherd examines each one as it passes for briars, snags, weeping eyes from dust and scratches. Each sheep's wounds are carefully cleansed. Then the shepherd dips his hands into the olive oil and anoints the injury. A large cup full of water is drawn from the jar - never half-full. The sheep sinks his nose into the cup to cleanse his eyes if fevered, and to drink until fully refreshed."

When all the sheep are at rest, the shepherd wraps himself in his robe and lies down in the doorway to sleep, facing the sheep." [From the Basque Sheepherder and the Shepherd Psalm]

The story is told of a well meaning grandmother who gave her eight year old granddaughter a very thorough book on penguins. The little girl wrote this candid note: "Dear grandmother; Thank you for the new book. It tells me more about Penguins than I wanted to know." You may now have been told more about sheep and shepherding than you wanted to know.

And yet, it is quite necessary to understand all the meanings involved whenever this image is used Biblically. When Jesus said he was the door to the sheepfold: or when he compared himself with a "good Shepherd" - this is the kind of content he was intending. He was referring to a relationship so very unique, so dependent, so intimate that we have no way to comprehend it other than getting inside his own mind-set. He was talking about a kind of security that only those who had seen it operating could understand.

I think Jesus was intending basically three things in the passage of scripture we read this morning. First, he was underscoring the Old Testament idea of God as a shepherd. In the days of polytheism, when people had many deities, the idea of one God was the distinctive character of the Israelite culture. In comparison with the Greeks who were inclined also to accept one God, the image of God as shepherd was startling. Gods were grandiose, bigger-than-life portraits of men. For the Greeks, God was a philosophic concept of ultimate goodness, ultimate justice or power. But the Jews kept insisting that God was most like a shepherd: and that his nature is known only in relationship with his flock. Jesus was underscoring that.

Second, Jesus was using the illustration to make a "messianic claim" for himself. "I am the door", "I am the good shepherd". Here Jesus was drawing on the theologi image known and accepted by his listeners and inserting himself in the key position. He was the shepherd - he knows the sheep - they are under his care - their safety and security are his responsibility.

Third, Jesus was saying something about the Church. It is to be like a flock in its dependence on him. Flocks must be fed, sheltered and led: so the Church of Jesus Christ is nourished by him in worship, study and fellowship.

Now, we live a long way from the pastoral environment of sheep-herding. And yet, perhaps that distance - chronological, geographical - but mainly cultural - makes even more relevant the word of God in this passage.

We live in a world totally devoid of a sense of God. To be sure there is much evidence of what has to be called "Pop Religion". If we went up and down the streets of this neighborhood asking people if they believed in God, the overwhelming response would be affirmative. Everyone believes in God - it's as American as apple pie and motherhood. But it is a phony religiosity: the God believed in by Pop Religion stays in his heaven and has nothing to do with the complexities of life. He is no power to be reckoned with: he is no force in life: he demands nothing but that anti-septic intellectual affirmation that he exists out there somewhere. He is the "man upstairs": the god who doesn't matter. He is an "un-god". Pop Religion is an important part of our culture, and one of its more serious effects is as an insulation from the radical claims of the God who was the father of Jesus Christ. So long as your God is safely stashed in heaven, remote from your life - your concerns - your problems - you don't have to be bothered with this other God, this God the Bible keeps claiming is as intimately involved with you and me as a shepherd is with his own sheep.

And so we live in a culture that pays lip-service to a Pop God, but is totally devoid of any sense of God's presence. That culture is one now being diagnosed as very sick. Its people are diagnosed as alienated, lost, adrift, without hope. Together they are walking through the dark valley of racial polarization caused by their own

godless insensitivity, a war that cannot be won and which many feel ought not even to be fought, crumbling cities which breed violence and poverty and more violence. And together this people seems to be crying out for their pop God - so long absent - to do something reconciling, something healing. Well, he won't and can't because that God never existed. He was a figment of the collective American imagination.

The God revealed by Jesus Christ - the God who is like a shepherd - has been here all along. We have ignored him: we have lived our lives and structured our institutions and exploited our minorities and condoned ghettoes and racism and poverty with no hope as if He were not here: as if somehow he wasn't involved.

The Good News of the Gospel, however, which sometimes sounds like very bad news, is that he is here; that he walks through the dark valleys with us: that he is intimately involved in our common life and our individual lives.

The implications of that for our common life are profound. If God is involved then how we conduct our corporate affairs suddenly becomes a moral and spiritual as well as a political question. Suddenly poverty becomes more than an unfortunate set of circumstances. Suddenly racism becomes far more than ignorance. Suddenly we're dealing with God when we call that man a nigger. Simultaneously we're dealing with our creator, the one with whom we ultimately have to do, when we look down our middle class noses at the A.D.C. mother. The comforting shepherd image - when understood in terms of intimate involvement - can be extremely judgmental. But to ignore this God is to miss totally the thrust of the Gospel.

Personally, the same logic maintains. We're not in this thing alone. What we do, how we feel, how we relate with others, matters a great deal - because we have a Shepherd who is with us. That can be bad news, if in fact we're playing with a "Pop God". But it can also be the best news in the world.

It means that you matter - and that I matter. Remember the shepherd standing at the door of the fold, cleansing each minor wound, annointing each tiny scratch with oil, nourishing each sheep with the cool water of affection and caring. Well, the good news of the Gospel is that God is like that with you and me. We pick up our scratches along the way: we have our problems, our disappointments. We experience shattering

grief when a loved one dies, and minor grief when a friendship is broken. We have hopes and dreams so dear to us that we are wounded when they come crashing down around our feet. And the good news of the Gospel is that God is so intimately involved with us that he shares the hurt and burden of everyone of these experiences. Nothing is too small, no wound too minor to escape his love. No experience is so shattering that he cannot help us through, picking up the pieces and presenting a new, creative possibility that we couldn't even have imagined before.

That's what it means to belong to the good Shepherd. That's the possibility - the saving, healing possibility that opens up when a man chooses to belong to his flock.

Jesus knew the Psalter: the Psalms of David were set to music and sung by the people in worship. He knew these ancient and good words. Hear them again - this time as the mind of him who is the good Shepherd: (R S V)

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil; for thou art with me;
Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." Amen.

Almighty God, make us sensitive to your presence. As we confront other people - help us to see them in the light of your love. As we encounter difficult days in our lives, help us to lean heavily on the healing grace of your love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.